

University of Groningen

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*Published in:*  
Stedelijk Studies

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Lehmann, A-S., & Spijksma, J. (2017). Flattening Hierarchies of Display: The Liberating and Leveling Powers of Objects and Materials. *Stedelijk Studies*, 5, 1-18. [7].  
<https://www.stedelijkstudies.com/journal/flattening-hierarchies-display-liberating-leveling-powers-objects-materials/>

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# Flattening Hierarchies of Display:

## The Liberating and Leveling Powers of Objects and Materials\*

Ann-Sophie Lehmann and  
Judith Spijksma

Recent collection display practices signal what has been described as a “comeback” for the integration of broad-ranging object categories in which the boundaries between these previously separated objects resolve.<sup>1</sup> Mixing objects from different object categories can take many forms, and occurs not only at the level of the objects themselves, but also at institutional levels. For categories such as painting, drawing, and applied arts, or the subcategories within, such as Renaissance drawings, porcelain, or twentieth-century art, are akin to the divisions in curatorial departments, galleries, or exhibition spaces and the people that work within them.<sup>2</sup> Also, museums that were initially not “disciplined” have been re-staged to reflect the originally mixed display, such as the Bode Museum, Berlin. Moreover, even in homogenous collections, a mixing of value and status becomes possible when chronology, subject matter, style, or school are not the guiding principle. Such display strategies of mixing therefore typically create new connections and enable collections of varying values, periods, and object categories to merge and their individual artifacts to meet in new and meaningful ways.

Thus, the questioning of traditional classifications and their implicit hierarchies in display leads to what cultural anthropologist and museologist Sharon Macdonald in 2006 called the “re-centering of the object,” a process in which the object calls itself to the attention of the viewer: without the structure of taxonomy or chronology, objects themselves and their particularities, as well as the question of why they were chosen to be displayed in the first place, tend to come to the fore.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis on the object in such displays is often expressed in the museum’s intent “to let the objects talk,” suggesting that through re-centering, objects gain a “voice,” or to put it more generally, agency.<sup>4</sup>

While the focus on the object was regarded as an effect of questioning classifications ten years ago, today it can also be seen as a cause for reinstalling collection displays. Creating mixed displays is, after all, not a natural process, and when a museum chooses to position its collection and change permanent displays in a way that implies crossing classifications and inner-institutional boundaries, it has to look for valid strategies to do so. The focus on the most

basic common denominator of all artifacts—the fact that they are artifacts—enables as well as justifies transgressions, because it creates equality: if objecthood is what a display focuses on, relations between everything become possible. In collections of modern and contemporary art, where the object has acquired art historical significance precisely for its everyday, non-art connotations (for instance as *objet trouvé*), objecthood might not serve as democratizer so readily as in pre-twentieth-century collections. Here, the even more general denominator of “material” or “materiality” may serve to create an equal footing. In both cases, highlighting objects, their materialities, or material as such invites mixing and makes room for those artworks and artifacts that tend to fall in between the cracks of hierarchies and traditional systems of ordering. With two short case studies—the semi-permanent displays *Ferhaal fan Fryslân (Story of Friesland)* at the Fries Museum, Leeuwarden, and *Material Worlds* at the Tate Modern, London, our essay addresses display strategies that enable mixing at these two most basic levels.

“Mixing,” our analysis hopes to show, is too general a notion to describe what happens to artifacts taken out of traditional taxonomies. Far from being exhaustive, we first present different approaches to displays that flatten hierarchies—in historical and current curatorial practices—and consider a number of theoretical approaches that have recently addressed or advocated mixing. It appears that curatorial practices with regard to mixed displays are incredibly diverse and need to be discussed with regard to their particular museums, their collections and overall aim and mission. “Mixing,” it also becomes apparent, can take place on many different levels. As a strategy, it can be defined as crossing created institutional boundaries, which are to be understood as specific features of a particular museum.<sup>5</sup> For example, the traditional art historical categorization by period, medium, genre, geographical origin, school, or artist, or that of a heterogeneous collection into different disciplines (historical, applied, art objects) both extend into curatorial departments, the museums’ public and is often embodied by the museum’s architecture. All such distinguishable collections are implicitly or explicitly influenced by the notion that some objects are intrinsically more worthy of research and display than others. Therefore, mixing as such does not yet question hierarchies, as one can mix perfectly well at “first-class” level only.

The case studies show that mixing at the level of objects or materials has indeed the effect of leveling out or “flattening” hierarchies that are inherent to prior forms of categorization and allows for different insights, different relations between objects, as well as between objects and viewers. However, we also show that this does not automatically lend objects more agency or “activates” them, as is often implied.<sup>6</sup> Considering both art and non-art museums, it becomes apparent that the type of institution, and the opportunities and restrictions afforded by their collections, greatly determine the potential of mixed displays. Currently, the focus on objects and the flattened hierarchies of prior classifications even seem to draw out a *retour à l’ordre*: a call for masterwork- or genre-oriented displays, that “dare” show the aesthetic qualities of art, bringing to the fore the historical relevance of objects, and limit the power of the curator to tell stories or impose yet another theme onto a collection.<sup>7</sup> We hope to show that carefully defined approaches to mixed displays that highlight a collection’s potential will enable a move beyond the dualism of masterwork versus egalitarian object, mixed versus pure, or theme versus taxonomy, and thus move beyond the pendulum effect.

## Thoughts and concerns about things crossing boundaries

Implying “pure” displays as a natural state of objects, the combination of objects across categories has been referred to as “mixed” since at least the nineteenth

century.<sup>8</sup> Originally intended to stabilize objects, classifications can also turn objects into examples and exclude context and significance. At the end of the nineteenth century, fundamental changes occurred in museums, including the display of collections and conventional displays based on classification by type and stylistic development, were criticized for the subordination of artworks and objects to systematics for systematics' sake. During the interbellum, collection displays were reorganized and, although those involved agreed on the necessity to reform, opinions on how this should be achieved differed. Wilhelm Bode argued that the "Mischung" of painting, sculpture, and other art forms of the same period and school was "wirkungsvoll und vorteilhaft für die einzelnen Kunstwerke."<sup>9</sup> Dutch art collector Frits Lugt proposed an even more radical way of mixing: for an appropriate appreciation of art, it should be interspersed with historical objects, arranged into a harmonious whole.<sup>10</sup> Others, such as the Dutch art historian Willem Vogelsang, dismissed these innovations as unscientific and wrote that art should appear ordered and not in a coincidental studio arrangement or a tasteful but random ordered display.<sup>11</sup> Marcel Proust gravely criticized the period rooms of his time for different reasons, namely "suppressing the essential thing"; in other words, the artwork's aesthetic aura.<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, the organization of objects according to movement, geographical origin, or genre, often arranged in medium- or discipline-specific galleries with a chronological presentation, has been predominant during the twentieth century.

In the last decade, several voices advocated a critical reconsideration of disciplinary divisions between museums, as well as the boundaries between different collections within museums. Such criticism is expressed in cultural history and anthropology, in particular. According to cultural historian Ivan Gaskell, the problems with systems of classification are twofold: first, classification systems do not have universal applicability but are culturally specific and, second "It accommodates new ideas about things with difficulty, especially those that relate to claims concerning their multivalences, and the multiplicity of their roles in various societies and across time."<sup>13</sup> Instead, objects do not have fixed functions or meanings. Moreover, Gaskell argues that leaving traditional collection orderings behind by mixing objects in display can bring new knowledge to the fore, suggesting artistic strategies and displays according to philosophical principles as useful examples of transgressive curatorial practices.<sup>14</sup> Gaskell and others also point out that the traditional (Western) classification of things is particularly harmful to objects from non-European cultures since these traditional European object categories are not always or entirely suitable to highlight their specific qualities.<sup>15</sup>

For the particular case of museums of history, previous head of Glasgow Museums, Mark O'Neill noted that existing essentialist taxonomies make it impossible to display history in significant ways, for "you can't say very much that is meaningful about the history of locomotives by showing only locomotives."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, argues O'Neill, it is essential for museums to look beyond departmental boundaries. A case in point is the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, which houses historical and art historical collections, and reopened in 2013 with a highly anticipated and much debated mixed display. In a critical appraisal of the new permanent display, art historian Mariët Westermann writes that mixing different art forms and historical objects can deliver high payoffs. It allows one to tell more inclusive stories and "enables the museums to present histories of art that are also national and regional histories of culture."<sup>17</sup> According to Westermann, the dual role of objects as historical document as well as artistic artwork allows visitors to establish connections between current situations and the past more easily. Therefore, although the lack of an exclusive art historical focus "represents a loss to historians of painting, the museum's integrated presentation offers compensatory gains" for regular visitors, as well as for art historians in general.<sup>18</sup>

Whereas the combining of different artistic and historical objects can enhance objects by adding more meaningful layers and relationships between objects, mixing in art museums can also emphasize essential features of art. According to Fieke Konijn, who analyzed important changes in the display of art after World War II, art is then put forward as a universal language that is part of a “family of minds,” instead of a school or style.<sup>19</sup> This idea gained interest in the first decennium of the twentieth century and was revived in the 1970s and ’80s, when Rudi Fuchs combined, among others, Kasimir Malevich with Jannis Kounellis in his collection display *Het ijzeren venster* (*The Iron Window*, 1985), and Harald Szeemann juxtaposed different paintings, sculptures and objects from the collection of the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in his *A-historische klanken* (*A-historical Soundings*, 1988). As Debora Meijers writes, these so-called “a-historical” exhibitions “cut across chronological boundaries as well as the conventional stylistic categories implemented in art history.”<sup>20</sup> They overturn traditional classification in material as well. These examples were not only criticized for “essentialism” and harking back to romanticist notions of resemblance and originality, but also for the expressed curatorial authority and its inherent emphasis on personal taste. It is a concern recently voiced anew in the context of mixed collection rehangs in the Whitney Museum and MoMA.<sup>21</sup>

While in one museum mixing allows for objects to tell more than one story, in a different setting mixing can reduce objects to tell the story of one person only: the curator. Apart from such apparently opposite effects, the mixing of objects might also result in what Westermann calls the “*rommelzolder* effect” (attic effect)—a picturesque accumulation of things creating an aesthetic disturbance, which had already been criticized by Vogelzang and Proust.<sup>22</sup> Another effect is that, rather than enabling objects to tell their stories more fully, too many things on show have the tendency to mute each other. For temporary shows with a highly experimental character, creating “a *mêlée* of disjointed elements” can be a calculated risk, as Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel described it in an article analyzing their show *Iconoclash*, held at the ZKM Karlsruhe in 2002, which combined diverse objects, artworks, and images across many and highly sensitive boundaries.<sup>23</sup> For permanent displays, however, such a risk should be avoided. Westermann suspects that one reason for the successful mixing at the Rijksmuseum is the high standard of the collections. Paradoxically, then, a successful flattening of hierarchies would depend on the quality of the objects involved. The same argument could apply, for example, to the open storage and the cabinet of curiosities as curatorial strategies, discussed in the next section.

The question, then, is if highlighting objects and their materiality lets new aspects surface and enriches the meanings of artworks and objects, or if subjectivity, essentialism, and the clutteredness and arbitrariness of the *rommelzolder* disguise meaning yet again, just like neatly arranged categorizations did before. Can mixing, as Gaskell and O’Neill argued, make better and more intelligent claims on the past? Does it afford the object’s multiple meanings and relevancies to come to the fore? Is it true that this strategy only works with collections of high quality, as Westermann suggested? Is mixing a mere fashionable hype, offering a solution to display dilemmas and quality ranges by creating room for literally anything? In order to formulate answers, we first need to look at the different approaches currently employed.

### Flattening hierarchies of display

There are several strategies for creating displays that overturn predominant collection and display rationales and thus flatten hierarchies in museum collections. The merging of art and history using different types of objects is applied with or without chronological or thematic arrangement in art museums

and (cultural) history museums. The Fries Museum in Leeuwarden applied this strategy to a heterogeneous collection without chronological arrangement, while the Victoria and Albert Museum (rearrangement of the British Galleries, 2006) and the Rijksmuseum do so while maintaining chronological order.

A second approach is the story-approach, foregrounded by, for instance, O'Neill in the context of history museums as a significant and meaningful alternative for aesthetics and classificatory displays by adding contextual layers, and therefore, significance to objects.<sup>24</sup> As social anthropologist Tim Ingold describes in his essay, "Stories against Classification," classifications are based on the intrinsic quality of things, yet tend to exclude the context in which things are encountered, for which they are made, and for whom and why: "In a story, by contrast, it is precisely by this context and these relations that every element is identified and positioned. Thus stories always, and inevitably, draw together what classifications split apart."<sup>25</sup> This strategy is potentially inclusive for objects of lesser aesthetic appeal, as it stimulates curators to look for other qualities.

Third, transhistorical approaches in art museums have been discernible throughout the twentieth century, in particular after 1945. A renewed interest is currently expressed by the Frans Hals Museum and De Hallen Haarlem in the Netherlands and by M – Museum Leuven in Belgium; both are institutions that are relatively young or have recently been joined together.<sup>26</sup> This strategy provides an alternative for historical classification and display in art museums by combining works from different historical contexts, carving out aesthetic and cultural consistencies, changes, or ruptures.

A fourth strategy, the open storage or visible storage display, may be the most radical form of mixing objects and flattening hierarchies, as it discards storytelling or contextualization (there are, for instance, no or only reduced labels) and brings materiality and objecthood to the fore. In general, the concept is rooted in the aim of democratizing the museum and making collections available to the public but it also relies on the attraction of a peek behind the scenes.<sup>27</sup> As a display strategy, it ranges from creating storage areas in (parts of) museum galleries as, for example, the Rijksmuseum's "Special Collections," to designing whole museums in an open storage fashion for instance, the Museum der Dinge, Berlin.<sup>28</sup> This approach has been criticized for its troubling interpretation and return to the early museum, and its uncritical stance towards colonial or non-Western objects. Celestine Bohlen, columnist for the *New York Times*, poignantly voiced this criticism early on:

*Putting complete collections of glass bottles, teacups, silver pitchers and pewter tankards on display in unadorned cases, lined up like bowling pins in mute surroundings with a minimum of labeling, seems more of a throwback to old-fashioned notions of European museums in which the object is put out there for those who know what they are looking at, and not for those who do not.*<sup>29</sup>

The cabinet of curiosities—traditionally described as the breeding ground of the modern museum—inspires a fifth display strategy that harks back to the earliest history of collecting. It affords the combination of objects from nature and culture, and as a curatorial concept has been employed in a wide variety of collections, ranging from university museums and museums of applied art and design, to museums of modern and contemporary art. Louise Bourgeois's small sculptures, for instance, were arranged into a "cabinet of curiosities" at Tate Modern; artists like Fred Wilson and Mark Dion have alluded to the cabinet, or *Kunstkammer*, with their curatorial interventions, in order to voice criticism of modern collection systematics, and the Victoria and Albert Museum used the first-ever guidelines for the arrangement of collections, written by collector

Samuel Quiccheberg in 1565, as inspiration for the new display of their own galleries devoted to the European “cabinet.”<sup>30</sup>

The V&A is also programmatic for yet another strategy of mixing, that between the visual and applied arts. It is typical for museums that house both art and historical collections like the Rijksmuseum, and for that matter all major Dutch national museums (of which the Groninger Museum was among the first to explicitly treat design as art), but also in museums originally designed to house applied arts only, such as the Museum für Angewandte Kunst (MAK) in Vienna. The boundaries between high and applied arts have been under strain from the moment they were drawn, and yet prove to be stable. A fairly recent strategy to undermine them is to involve artists in the design of collection displays. The MAK, for instance, invites artists to contribute to the mixing of visual and applied art in the permanent displays by letting them choose and design the display architecture. The “artist strategy” is, therefore, a sixth strategy to flatten hierarchies, and it expands beyond exhibition design into curatorial practice: artistic interventions in museums range from institutional critique—a deliberate strategy to deal with uncomfortable histories or objects, for instance, in medical or colonial collections—to the freedom to use objects to give them “a new lease of life,” or simply to make visible objects that otherwise would remain in storage.<sup>31</sup> Artists, in particular, seem to be able to flatten hierarchies between objects and create equality. As Ann Demeester, director of the Frans Hals Museum and De Hallen Haarlem explains in an exhibition video on the artistic intervention of Gavin Wade, “We have invited artists and guest curators before and told them: the collection is yours to play with. Take out what’s inside, expose those works that we might never show, *and give all the same value* [our emphasis].”<sup>32</sup> The underlying assumption that artists automatically provide critical frameworks, bring new knowledge to the fore, or create aesthetic change, however, can also create an easy way out of collection dilemmas. The “artist strategy” therefore, should never become a default move.<sup>33</sup>

A final strategy to be addressed here is one that brings the materiality of objects to the fore. Material as a taxonomic system was introduced for archaeological collections, which often had little more to go by than material categories like stone, bronze, or iron. A classification based on materials and the technologies developed to work them was also developed for museums of applied art in the middle of the nineteenth century, which initially started out as institutions to support craft education and trade. Advocated by pioneers like Gottfried Semper during the second half of the nineteenth century, the taxonomy of material and technique was criticized soon after, for instance, by Alois Riegl; a focus on materials alone, he argued, reduced an artifact to a technical item and diminished the visibility of human creativity.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, after the turn of the century, museums of applied arts would soon shift their displays away from materials and techniques to highlight the artistic appeal of their objects.<sup>35</sup> The notion that a focus on material and technique would neglect the aesthetic and cultural values of object, however, was based on the division of the realms of culture and nature and their designated disciplines, the humanities and natural sciences. Materials and technique were regarded as belonging exclusively to the latter and, within this paradigm, appeared unable to illustrate aesthetic developments or tell stories of culture and creation, and were therefore deemed unfit for meaningful displays. Eventually, this led to the exclusion of raw materials, material samples, and half-fabricates, which had served to show and explain the processes of turning material into artifacts, from displays and their eventual deaccession. Despite these shifts, material taxonomies remained intact and many museums still divide glass, silver, earthenware, etc., simply because specific materials require specific climate, lightning, or spatial conditions, which are easier created and guaranteed when materials of one sort are kept together. As taxonomic principle, materials have a naturally flattening

effect as they make equal all things made of wood, paint, or bronze, etc. The recent critical assessment of the nature-culture dichotomy allows for material to become a relevant category again. When reintroduced as a display strategy that focuses not on a specific material, but on materiality as such, its democratic potential is even greater, as material condition, its meaning-making potential, and materials' affordance to connect nature to culture in art-making is highlighted.

There are certainly other strategies that can be added, but in the following paragraph we focus on two that we have had the chance to study in more detail: Fries Museum's *Ferhaal fan Fryslân*, which was installed in 2013 and mixes artworks with historical and applied objects, and Tate Modern's *Material Worlds*, installed in the spring of 2016.

## Story of Friesland and Material Worlds

Due to its focus on the history and culture of Friesland, the collection of the Fries Museum – founded in 1881 – is highly varied. Despite significant rearrangements, the display of the collection remained mostly chronological and arranged according to distinguished collections, such as textile, silver, and archaeology.<sup>36</sup> While the combination of different kinds of objects and art forms has always been present in the background, it became explicitly visible in historical displays such as the Hindelooperkamer, a period room devoted to a particular Frisian form of interior decoration. However, while preparing for the opening of the new museum building in 2013, the Fries Museum started a process of rethinking its collection strategy. As a result, the museum focusses on stories and narratives to highlight the collection's coherency and to enable connections between these "artificially" separated collections and departments.<sup>37</sup>

For one of the inaugural exhibitions in the new museum building, which opened in 2013, the museum developed a semi-permanent collection display that mixes profoundly different things, regardless of their disciplinary or aesthetic status, in order to highlight the variety of the collection and express its core identity.<sup>38</sup> Absorbed by a visually dominant exhibition architecture, the objects perform a role as containers for stories about the history of Friesland and the Frisians. They are things of vastly different use and exchange value—a soccer jersey in the proximity of a *fibula*—representing a time frame ranging from 10,000 BCE to 2013 CE. The display speaks not only for the objects, but also for the museum's identity as a collection initially devoted to Frisian antiquities, of which its diversity, ranging from archaeology to visual and applied art, is a distinguishing feature. In 2015 it received the national BankGiro Lottery Museum Prize for its convincing integration of art and history. But what is the effect of such radical heterogeneity upon, for example, the objects involved? And does the highlighting of objects support storytelling, as the display's title suggests?





Fig. 1. Installation view of *Ferhaal fan Fryslân*, left “Where a small country can be great,” right “Between dream and reality,” Fries Museum, Leeuwarden (2013).

In *Ferhaal fan Fryslân*, the objects’ story is the guiding principle. Through the installation that connects very disparate things, the history of the Frisian landscape, people, and things unfolds in fragments, ideally evoking curiosity and encouraging visitors to create and shape their own narrative, which is why there is no chronological arrangement and no clear route to follow. The display is divided into five platforms, each representing a theme with objects arranged accordingly: “Between dream and reality,” “Friesland and the world,” “*It bêste lân fan d’ierde* (The best country in the world),” “Strange folk, those Frisians,” and “Where a small country can be great.” The objects are placed on different heights, each in their own custom-made case or framework, in dialogue but also in competition with one another, as paintings and three-dimensional objects in part screen each other from view. The platforms structure the objects on display, as one can walk around the platform but not around the objects. Photos of Frisian landscapes adorn the walls surrounding the exhibition space, superimposed with texts by poets and writers, illuminating the particularities of the Frisian landscape and people.



Fig. 2. Installation view of *Ferhaal fan Fryslân*, “Friesland and the world,” Fries Museum, Leeuwarden (2013).

In the wall text, the museum emphasizes the objects’ ability to draw out stories by calling them *niisgjirrige objecten* (curious objects). This unusual amalgamation is supposed to cause the viewer to glimpse back in time and imagine objects in their original surrounding and use. Take, for example, a cane made of whalebone, ascribed to ancient tribal peoples such as Vikings, found in an artificial hill in Bernsterburen. Inscribed with runes, it has magical connotations, its precise origin is unknown, and the text hard to decipher, making the piece one of the most mysterious objects in the museum. Several portraits of the Orange-Friesland Regiment’s staff of officers serving under Prince Willem Karel Hendrik Friso, who became Stadholder of Friesland in 1731,

are displayed, together with finds from artificial hills. The “officers’ gallery,” of which twenty-five portraits have been preserved, is unique in Europe [Fig. 2]. Another vitrine contains *oorijzers* (the literal translation is “ear-irons”), frames that shape the cap that is part of a Frisian costume. This fashion item from the sixteenth century evolved into gold and silver jewelry during the seventeenth century and became popular again during the nineteenth century in an exaggerated format. Several headpieces are arranged in such a way as to form a visually striking demonstration of this evolution. Other objects rely on the attractiveness of obscurity, like a colorful painting based on Frisian folktales, with a distinct touch of outsider art.

Instead of extensive object labels and wall texts, a book with supporting images and a story about each object accompanies the display. These inform visitors about the very different and interesting objects, and subsequently their Frisian contexts and histories. The objects and stories also enable visitors to correct or nuance things that are conceived of as particularly “Frisian.” For instance, an early nineteenth-century silver ball depicting a *keats* ball, (Frisian handball) teaches visitors that *keatsen* is not as Frisian a sport as it is generally considered. Dike workers from the Biesbosch area near Dordrecht brought it with them to Friesland when they worked there during the land reclamation operations around 1500. In those days, the game was very popular everywhere in Europe, especially in France. Yet sometimes, stories and objects are out of sync: a painting by Tjerk Bottema, for example, an almost abstract depiction of cows and farms, is an incentive to elaborate on different architectural types of farms in distinct time periods [Fig. 3]. A thirteenth-century baptismal font illustrates the attempt to Christianize the Frisians in the seventh century. Despite the overall Frisian narrative, the open-ended gathering of things as diverse as a soccer jersey and a 10,000-year-old firestone reinforces a notion of arbitrariness. For without the additional information, what is a visitor to make of the juxtaposition of a portrait of a young boy by Koos Breaker and a silver spoon?



Fig. 3. Tjerk Bottema, *Compositie met koeien en rode daken* (Composition with Cows and Red Roofs), 1920–1929, oil paint on canvas, Fries Museum Collection.

Yet despite this apparent arbitrariness, the approach proves very meaningful for a museum with diverse collections, since it allows one to focus on specific stories and choose objects regardless of aesthetics, disciplines, categories, or hierarchies. In this display, however, the meaning of objects is limited to their local and historical importance. This reduction in order to fit the overarching narrative is emphasized by the exhibition design, which isolates objects in cases

and allows them to be seen only from a single perspective, diminishing their three-dimensionality and thus also their objecthood. Despite these critical issues, the display does engage visitors in a playful way and allows them to make choices based on personal interest and curiosity, the result of leaving out a governing route and making additional information available in a booklet. A democratic effect is achieved through the open-ended combination of different objects, as well as by the display itself. The latter allows for the inclusion of objects that might be of limited aesthetic or even cultural significance, but highly relevant for the province's history.

The story, in other words, liberates objects that might otherwise never be shown and levels out hierarchies of display between objects of art, science, craft, archeology, and material culture. At the same time, the story restricts the objects again by activating only parts of their object biography.<sup>39</sup> A different way of leveling and liberating can be observed in Tate Modern's collection display, *Material Worlds*.

Tate Modern is well known for revolutionizing collection displays in museums of modern and contemporary art: it prioritized themes above -isms and softened the boundaries between exhibition and permanent display by introducing semi-permanent displays.<sup>40</sup> Anticipating the move to a new building, Tate Modern began rethinking their collection display as early as 1998. Frances Morris—curator since 1987, head of displays from 2000–2006, and director since 2016—explains in a 2012 article that the key to Tate's ambition was “to break with the usual distinction between the more experimental and speculative vehicle of the temporary exhibition and the permanently installed, institutionally authored ‘canonical’ narratives of the collection that were then the norm throughout Europe and America.”<sup>41</sup> For the visitors, the new collection arrangements were to “provide accessible and thought-provoking displays to wide-ranging audiences. We hoped to offer memorable encounters with unfamiliar works and to encourage new understandings of familiar icons. We aimed to generate, around familiar collection works, the kind of excitement, surprise, and debate more common to scholarly or spectacular loan exhibitions.”<sup>42</sup> As themes demand intensive curating, Tate has chosen to accentuate the work through the wall texts, which explain choices and lend the curators involved an explicit voice by referencing them as authors.

Given the success and impact of the displays, Tate helped creating a new epistemology for museums in which the “permanent” is overturned in favor of a more dynamic, research-based, and experimental attitude towards the collection. In contrast to institutions committed to a provincial identity or applied art, Tate's homogenous collection of British and international art is bound to art history as a discipline. As such, the displays seek to provide alternative readings, create new art historical perspectives, and are designed with a flexibility that allows a reaction to changes within the discipline: “changing role models and shifting agendas as well as the impact of new research in art history cause a continuous rethinking of collection priorities.”<sup>43</sup>

In the spring of 2016 the last of four new collection displays, *Material Worlds*, opened (the earlier ones being *Making Traces*, *Citizens and States*, and *Media Networks*).<sup>44</sup> *Material Worlds* includes the subthemes “Between Man and Matter” (based on the 1970 Tokyo Biennale), “Texture and Photography,” “Assemblage,” “Expanded Painting,” seven rooms devoted to individual artists, and the interactive display, “Explore Objects and Materials.” The display highlights the material presence of works of art and unites them on the grounds that they are all, in the first place, material, offering the viewer an unusually unbiased way of looking at immensely diverse artworks. Some works, such as those in the restaging of the Tokyo Biennale, emphasize their materiality with a

certain notion of purity: wood, canvas, concrete, pigments, or plastics come to the fore as meaning-making stuff [Fig. 4].



*Fig. 4. Installation view of Material Worlds, "Between Man and Matter," Tate Modern, London (2016).*

But the display is not restricted to works that are blatantly explicit about their material, which would, in fact, reinforce an ideologically charged notion of “truth to materials” or “naturalness,” suggesting that materials are only important in some works of art and not so much in others.<sup>45</sup> Rather, these works are presented as a part of a material world, which as a display has the ambition to potentially include all materials; for instance, the materials of media artworks that are elusive, complex, changing, digital, and have therefore often been misunderstood as being less material or even immaterial. Or, for instance, that of photography, in which the objects are material *and* show material, as the room with a series of Guy Bourdin’s black-and-white photographs illustrates [Fig. 5].



*Fig. 5. Installation view of Material Worlds, "Texture and Photography," Tate Modern, London (2016).*

According to Valentina Ravaglia, one of the curators who designed the display, the aim was to address the viewer as directly as possible and to avoid “art speak” while offering different layers of complexity.<sup>46</sup> It is important not to misunderstand such an aim: direct address does not mean that materials speak easier to those who do not know about art than other themes. To highlight materials, rather, means to address a type of knowledge that is not about art yet can benefit the understanding of art and is democratic and accessible, because all viewers have some hands-on experience with, and thus knowledge of materials; for instance, about their combinations and transformations, or how they look, smell, or feel. *Material Worlds* mobilizes this knowledge to look at and understand art, while at the same time the works on display are enabled to move



beyond the museum context and can question or enhance experiences, knowledge, and assumptions about materials in the “real world.” Thus, the display positions materials as explicit and connective elements of the world inside and outside of the museum. Like Morris described, Tate’s displays not only aim to engage with the audience, but also with changing art historical discourses. Indeed, the gallery “Exploring Materials and Objects” of *Material Worlds* connects art history’s renewed interest in materiality with a recent reevaluation of education about art [Fig. 6].<sup>47</sup>



Fig. 6. Installation view of *Material Worlds*, “Exploring Materials and Objects,” Tate Modern, London (2016).

In this room the visitor encounters Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, pinpointed by Lucy Lippard as “obvious art historical source” for the rise of conceptual art, which she famously described as the dematerialization of art.<sup>48</sup> For the longest time, Duchamp’s work epitomized the move away from making and materials, which were associated with traditional paradigms such as virtuosity, originality, authorship or skilled craftsmanship. Here, *Fountain* is prominently positioned vis-à-vis an educational, hands-on display that invites visitors to touch, explore, and engage with questions such as “What comes first, Idea or Material?” [Fig. 7].



Fig. 7. Installation view of *Material Worlds*, “Exploring Materials and Objects,” Tate Modern, London (2016).

The dematerialization is thus rematerialized. After all, Duchamp chose the urinal for its particular material properties: an industrially produced item of water-resistant porcelain. The pairing of conceptual artwork and educational display signals a radical step across the divide that once caused museums of applied art to get rid of their material samples and half-fabricates because they were merely educational and stood in the way of experiencing objects as “art.” The

*Material Worlds* display thus not only successfully flattens hierarchies between media, geographies, and generations by accentuating art as being material. It also tackles one of the strongest dichotomies of the discipline: the hierarchically structured, dualist configuration of idea above matter and concept above execution. Finally, by matching an interactive, educational set-up to a Duchamp, it lends a display genre that generally suffers a low standing in curatorial hierarchies an equal status. Materials, it appears, have a radically flattening potential on many levels.

## Motivations and effects of liberating and leveling

Obviously, the two displays discussed here are embedded in two entirely different institutional settings, which in turn determine the possibilities and restrictions of displays. Yet exactly this disparity shows how the motivations for mixing at the basic level of objects and materials differ.

Motivations can be found in institutional specificities (reviewing collections, new acquisitions, circumvent gaps in collections, lack of exhibition budget, etc.) and demands of public engagement; in the aim to explain and narrate certain (art) historical developments or in the questioning of dominant paradigms. Then there are societal developments that cause the “re-centering of the object,” for example, the pressure to make collections accessible to the public (a driving factor for open storage displays), as well as institutional critique that challenges implicit racial, colonial, or gender stereotypes purported in displays. The V&A, for example, developed the mixed display of the British Galleries in response to criticism in the 1980s of aesthetic and national hierarchies that also forced the museum to reflect on its own institutional history.<sup>49</sup> The mixing of art and craft in the MAK was motivated by the desire of former director Peter Noever to set off a process which should “remove the ideological division between the applied and visual arts and constantly review the ever-ambiguous relationship between contemporary and old art, between what has been passed down and what is new.”<sup>50</sup> Fries Museum and Tate show different motivations yet again. The former developed an emphasis on storytelling to turn a potential weakness—the collection’s immense diversity—into an asset. Tate Modern wanted to overturn conventional assumptions about modern and contemporary art and engage with recent developments in arts and humanities research.

Despite diversity in motivation, there are some distinct effects that mixing at the level of objects and materials can cause or enhance. First, there is the effect of “story” as a new ordering principle for the liberated objects. *Ferhaal fan Fryslân*, it has already been suggested, creates a strong narrative through the radical flattening of hierarchies between object categories. The story, however, comes at the cost of hiding the individual biographies of the objects involved. Although the display architecture is designed to let the visitor choose her/his own path, and thus allow for an individual perspective within the larger narrative; the objects and their stories are authored by the museum. Because no object can ever tell the entire story and every object has several, endlessness is an intrinsic dilemma of “story” as curatorial and collecting strategy, as Sharon Macdonald and Jennie Morgan have shown in their recent ethnographical research into how museums deal with profusion.<sup>51</sup>

Secondly, there is an aesthetic effect caused by mixing at the level of objecthood and materiality, and some of its success as a mode of display relies on it. This is the poetic effect evoked by the intelligent combination of entirely different objects that have absolutely nothing to do with each other, but exactly because of this stimulate the imagination of curators and audience alike. As such, Fries Museum’s firestone versus soccer jersey or portrait versus silver spoon are reminiscent of the surrealist encounter between sewing machine and

umbrella, and also draw their narrative power from this ‘aesthetic of arbitrariness’.<sup>52</sup> These object poetics also explain the attractiveness of the “artist strategy” described above; not necessarily practices of institutional critique intended to uncover uncomfortable histories, but rather those practices in which collections and objects are appropriated, covering up historical, social, or cultural contexts. For example, Gavin Wade’s additional display units, temporarily added to the permanent display of the collection at the Frans Hals Museum, appropriated artworks and artifacts from different periods and contexts. His juxtaposition of the video *Sehnsucht* (2002) by Jeroen Eisinga and *Still Life with Fish* (ca. 1675) by Isaac Duynen stimulates imagination and personal associations, but also flattens out the differences and contextual specificities of objects.

A third effect concerns temporalization. The contestation and departure from hierarchies and canonical narratives affords the juxtaposition of objects and materials, either in associative spaces, thematic frameworks, or both. This seems to result in—or work in tandem with—the temporalization of collection displays. As Ivan Gaskell has pointed out, a crucial restriction of the display as medium is the fact that while “it can illuminate certain qualities of an object, display cannot exhaust it.”<sup>53</sup> Like any medium, the museum display also has to deal with the paradox of representation (i.e., by foregrounding on one aspect, another will necessarily be screened from view). *Ferhaal fan Fryslân*, it has already been pointed out, is a case in point: the leveling out of differences between objects comes at the cost of limiting each object’s biography. A way out of this dilemma is to render it explicit; for instance, by putting ongoing research about objects on display and admitting work-in-progress into the showcase, rather than putting research behind the scenes. Such flexibility dovetails with the integration of “permanent” collection display and temporary exhibition that can be observed in many museums. Permanent displays inevitably become old fashioned and outmoded, so “what if, instead of taking for granted the intrinsic immobility of permanent collection displays, we were to approach them as an ongoing series of temporary exhibitions,” as a curator of fine arts asks in a special section in *The Exhibitionists* on the “Collection Show,” a term that incorporates the merger between permanent and temporary.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, many museums today have built in some sort of flexibility that allows for the modification of collection displays. The Fries Museum intends to change *Ferhaal fan Fryslân* after six years; it also developed an ongoing display series in which new acquisitions form the starting point for exhibition-led research. For Tate Modern, themed displays went hand-in-hand with semi-permanence. Two other recent examples suggest that mixing at the basic level of objecthood and the wish to create more flexible collection displays enable one another: in 2015 Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen developed five shows from its holdings so that the audience could engage with the collection’s diverse objects, in a “labyrinth of beauty and knowledge that links centuries and people.”<sup>55</sup> In 2016, after two years of refurbishment, the Hamburger Kunsthalle reopened with a three-year cycle of displays from its collection of contemporary art, called *Honey, I Rearranged the Collection*. The first exhibition installment was titled *The Magic of Things*.

In conclusion, two aspects appear particularly important: a display concept with a governing curatorial logic can allow for objects from different categories to merge. Yet, however smart the concept and however commendable the motivation for mixed display may be, the relation between objects can never solely rely on a concept. On the other end of the spectrum, highlighting objecthood as such by relying on the aesthetics of arbitrariness in open storage or cabinet of curiosities-like arrangements leads to a call for objects to be returned to their separate niches so that “essential” qualities may be experienced again. A way out of these dilemmas was offered in Rachel

Wetzler's analysis of the rehang at the Whitney: "the experimental impulse behind them [reinstallations] is ultimately promising... Putting the contents of storage into the picture hints at histories that have been suppressed. The history of art has always been more unwieldy and complicated than any museum's timeline allows."<sup>56</sup>

While bringing objecthood and materiality to the fore is no default solution to own up to this history, it helps to find ways of displaying the complicated multiplicity of things in a form that is relevant to today's audiences. After breaking down existing taxonomies, to start again from the most basic of levels—materials and objects—creates the freedom to relate everything to anything, thus offering exciting opportunities as well as hazards. If a museum considers a radical rearrangement, it can profit from the strategies that have been employed and tested by others, as we have tried to show here.



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\* The idea for this article emerged during the summer school *The Knowledge of the Curator*, held in July 2016 at the University of Groningen in collaboration with the Groninger Museum, where we experimented with the unlikely combination of dissimilar objects. We would like to thank all participants and Ivan Gaskell in particular, whose thinking across borders inspired us.

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43. Morris, "From then to now and back again: Tate Modern collection display," 24.
44. On the website the display is referred to as *Material Worlds*, but also as *Materials and Objects*, while *Citizens and States* is also called *Artist and Society*. The arbitrary naming is not further explained; see <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/display/tate-modern-displays/about-collection-displays>. We use *Material Worlds*, as it is the title visible to the audience in the galleries.
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